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FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: DEATH OF SHEIKH AL-AHMAR PACKS AN EMOTIONAL PUNCH

REF: A. SANAA 2266  
[1](#)B. SANAA 2334

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the Speaker of Yemen's Parliament and its most powerful tribal figure, died in Saudi Arabia on the morning of December 29 and was buried on December 31. His various titles and roles will likely be distributed among the men who performed those functions during his long illness. Consequently, the impact of his death is likely to be largely emotional. End Summary.

#### The Sheikh is Dead

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[1](#)2. (C) On December 29 Mohamed Qahtan, a member of the Islah party's Supreme Council, told PolOff that the Speaker of Yemen's Parliament, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Husayn al-Ahmar, had passed away that morning in Saudi Arabia. In addition to being Speaker of the Parliament, the late Sheikh was the head of the opposition Islah party, Paramount Sheikh of the Hashid tribe, and Sheikh of Sheikhs for all of Yemen's tribes. The impending death of al-Ahmar, who had been hospitalized in Saudi Arabia and recently in the United Kingdom, had been the subject of speculation in Yemen for some time. In a December 30 meeting, Foreign Minister AbuBakr al-Qirbi called the death of al-Ahmar "a great loss" to Yemen and said that the late Sheikh had been a moderating force, particularly on tribal issues.

#### Funerary Arrangements

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[1](#)3. (C) In a December 29 meeting, Assistant Deputy Foreign Minister Khalid al-Akwa told PolOff that the ROYG had announced a three day period of mourning (December 29-31) for the late Sheikh. He added that the ROYG was assisting in the return of al-Ahmar's remains to Yemen and that the funeral was scheduled for December 31. This morning, prayers for the deceased were held at a mosque in the old city of Sana'a followed at 9:30 AM by a procession to Sabeen Square. An estimated crowd of 200 to 300 thousand attended the ceremony and procession. The ROYG closed the area to vehicular traffic for the duration of the event. The burial took place later at a cemetery in the Hadda neighborhood in the south of Sana'a. Those mourners who attended the burial (a subset of the larger group) were invited by the family to a lunch and qat chew starting at 11:00 AM at the Tourist City compound adjacent to the U.S. Embassy. No violence or disturbances were reported.

¶4. (U) A separate condolence program for dignitaries and the diplomatic corps was held at 3:00 PM on December 31. The Ambassador attended.

¶5. (C) Poloff asked al-Akwa if the ROYG expected any problems dealing with large numbers of tribal mourners entering Sana'a, in light of the ban on the carrying of weapons in the capital. Al-Akwa noted that the ROYG had negotiated an agreement with the Hashid tribe who, like other tribes, has been resistant to the ban, to surrender its weapons. Regardless of any such agreements, the ROYG exerted considerable efforts to keep the ceremonies from getting out of hand. PolOffs traveling to work in the hours prior to the funeral noted military checkpoints on roads approaching the cemetery in Hadda, increased military presence on the streets, and even the deployment of water cannons. RSO reported that mourners approaching Sabeen Square were being searched before being allowed to pass.

¶6. (C) In the early afternoon on December 29, Sabaphone, a local cell phone service owned by al-Ahmar's son Hamid, circulated SMS messages to its subscribers inviting them to a local exposition facility to express their condolences. 3000 to 5000 people are estimated to have attended. The mood was said to be solemn with many mourners chewing qat.

Where Will the Power Go?

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¶7. (S) Ref A predicted that no one person would assume all of Sheikh al-Ahmar's titles and positions. This prediction now appears to have been accurate. On December 30, al-Qirbi told the Ambassador that al-Ahmar's eldest son Sadiq, a close ally of President Saleh, will become the paramount Sheikh of the Hashid tribe. (Note: This was also confirmed by a military source who said that the decision had been made over a year ago (septel). End Note.) Al-Qirbi approved of this choice, calling Sadiq "assured and responsible" and noting that he will be "a son who will follow in his father's footsteps."

¶8. (C) Al-Qirbi said that al-Ahmar had been made Speaker of Parliament because of his credibility and prestige but that the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) would now most likely select one of their own to replace him. Speculation among embassy contacts has long focused on Deputy (currently Acting) Speaker (and GPC member) Yahya al-Raie.

¶9. (C) With respect to the leadership of Islah, Qirbi was much more reserved, saying: "We will have to wait and see what will happen within Islah. It is too early to know. It will be a very important indicator of which way Islah is going." Post sees Mohammed Abdullah al-Yadumi, Islah's deputy head, as his most likely successor.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Sheikh al-Ahmar has been unable to perform his roles for some time. If, as post suspects, his roles as Sheikh of the Hashid tribe, Speaker of the Parliament and head of Islah pass to the men who have been performing them during his illness, the impact of his death will be mostly emotional.  
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